

Persecution in today's world

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[0:00] All I say about myself, and thank you for that introduction, is I'm actually a nurse and a social scientist by intention. That's what I thought I was doing in my life, and a baroness by astonishment. And it really was God's sense of humor.

I don't like politics, and you become a baroness by being appointed to the House of Lords, which is like your Senate. And I was so much not in that world, I was the first baroness I'd ever met. About my family, I never met one in my life.

And you wake up one morning, and you find a baroness looking at yourself out of the bathroom mirror, and it's quite a shock. And I'm also basically very shy, and I don't like politics. I said, dear Lord, you know what, are you doing putting me in the House of Lords?

And then the message came, I think, very clearly. It's a wonderful place to be a voice for those who do not have a voice, whose voices are not heard. So that's how I try to use my time in the House of Lords, being a voice for people who don't have a voice.

And I set up my small little charity, Heart Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, to work for victims of oppression and persecution. And that gives us the very great privilege of being able to meet some of our brothers and sisters who are indeed heroes and heroines of our faith around the world.

[1:11] And this morning, I just want to share with you some of those experiences, some of their messages. Because one thing that humbles me so much is however much they're suffering in terrible ways, they're in war zones, they may be starving, they may have no medical care.

I always say, what's your priority? And their priority is always for prayer. So wonderful to share that message with you this morning. And it's working. Just it is important to remember that we can sit here with our celebration of our wonderful faith today because those who have gone before us who paid the price for our faith.

And they're still paying that price now. Christian persecution, at least 250 million Christians suffering persecution around the world today, at least 250.

It's probably gone up. The main context of that persecution, communism, North Korea. Of course, we hear about that much on the news at the moment about nuclear weapons.

But the suffering of Christians in North Korea is horrendous. Fundamentalist Hinduism, parts of India, Christians have suffered. Political Buddhism, some places that the Rohingya Muslims are suffering, we hear about that on the news.

[2:22] We don't hear about the Kachin and eastern Burma where they're suffering at the hands of the Burmese military regime. And, of course, a growing persecution and a militant Islam in Nigeria, in Syria, in so many places.

And it is really important to remember we do actually have an obligation to remember our brothers and sisters. As St. Paul said in his letter to the church at Corinth, when one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer.

We're not necessarily called to go out there and be alongside them in their persecution. But we are to suffer with them spiritually in faith and alongside them in love and prayer.

So we're going to travel very briefly to some of the places where our brothers and sisters are suffering and do ask for your prayers. We're going to begin in Armenia. Armenia, the first nation to become Christian in 301.

You can perhaps just see in the background there a hazy picture of a mountain. That's Mount Ararat. And it's Armenia's national symbol.

[3:26] But it's trapped behind Turkish borders because of the genocide. But just a quick message about how Christianity came to Armenia. Mission is not easy, as we know. There's a guy called Gregory who wanted to bring the good news of the gospel to Armenia.

Well, the king was a pagan. He didn't want this Christianity. So he gave Gregory a horrible death sentence. He was thrown into the bottom of a deep dungeon. And that dungeon is under that church today.

It's the round bit at the end. And poor Gregory had 11 long years in the depths of that dungeon. He survived miraculously because that dungeon would have been crawling with snakes and scorpions. But the king's sister took a shrine to Gregory. And we go down in that dungeon every time we visit Armenia as a tribute to our brothers and sisters suffering persecution. It's not still covered with snakes and scorpions.

I might not have done quite so regularly if it were. But as you look up from the bottom, there's a little slit in the wall about two-thirds of the way up. And every night, the king's sister used to put food and drink down there for poor old Gregory.

[4:30] So he suffered in the bottom of that dungeon for all those years. And I sometimes think during those years, he must have felt a little bit like St. Teresa of Avila, who reportedly said very reproachfully to our Lord one day, Oh God, it's not surprising you have so few friends the way you treat them.

I think the persecuted church must quite often feel like that. Anyway, Armenia suffered the first major genocide of the last century. And I just wonder if you can help me.

The desktop doesn't give me the slides. If you can just let me move it forward one by one, I'd be really grateful. What I say might bear some resemblance to what's up here. It's not showing on my desktop.

I've only got six slides. I can't move it on. If you don't mind, I'd be really... I'm sorry, I'm a technological Neanderthal. I think at the age of 80, I'm entitled to be. But thank you. If I can just get it to a full slide each time and move it on, that would be brilliant.

Actually, while this is happening, this is a good time to give advantage to Andrew. Like this? Or do you even just pull a slide if it's possible? That's fine. Lovely. Thanks. Thank you so much.

[5:42] Isn't it lovely to have the techie guys? Well, Armenia suffered the first major genocide of the last century when one and a half million Armenians were murdered by Ottoman Turkey. And then it suffered again in Stalin's days when Stalin, under Soviet communism, decided to use his tsunami tactics and cut people off from their roots.

And he put a little bit of ancient Armenia inside Azerbaijan. And this is where that is, that little land, Nagorno-Kharabakh. And as the Soviet Union imploded, Azerbaijan wanted the Christians out of this little land.

They began ethnic cleansing, and it was a brutal, horrendous war. That's a little land. It's only about 50 miles east-west, 100 miles north-south.

150,000 Armenians lived there. And they had to defend it against 7 million strong Azerbaijan, hunting rifles against tanks. It was the most high-intensity conflict of the early 90s.

Used to count 400 grad missiles a day pounding in on that little city. Azerbaijan used low-flying aerial bombardment, deliberately targeting civilians. That picture, I'm afraid, was the home of the guy in the blue jeans in the middle of the capital city, Stepanaket.

[6:54] A direct hit. He got called in from the front line with his brother because under that pile of rubble are his pregnant wife and his two little girls. It was a horrendous, tragic time.

But there were also miracles. This wonderful church to the north of Harabakh, St. John the Baptist. Now, Azerbaijan was determined, like ISIS is and Al-Qaeda, to destroy all Christian places of worship.

This church sits on a mountain promontory. And again and again, Azerbaijan aircraft flew over. And you couldn't miss it. The sticks of bombs just rained down on this church. I flew over in a helicopter in the war.

I framed it here in a cross made by the blades of a helicopter, perhaps symbolically. But all those bombs which fell, they were all brushed aside by God's arm, a divine arm.

The monastic outbuildings, as near to the church as that wall is to me, were flattened. The church remained gloriously intact to the glory of God. And the only bomb which got through that divine protection never exploded.

[7:54] It's imploded in one of the monastic walls. And we always finish our pilgrimages around that unexploded bomb. So I would say, forget health and safety regulations. It's a place to praise. It's a place, truly, to praise God.

But miracles of grace abound. The Archbishop of Karabakh, I was there on the day when his house got a direct hit. He's a man whose life was saved by prayer. Every morning when the bombs started coming in, he would get up to pray.

Pitch dark, freezing cold, no electricity, no light. On this morning, his house got a direct hit. And on the bed where he would have been staying if he hadn't got up to pray, a huge concrete slab fell, which would have flattened him.

I went to visit him in the afternoon to give my sympathies. And here he is in the smoldering ruins of his house. And I said, Bishop, nobody really knows what's happening in your land. Do have a message for the world.

And this is his amazing message. And just think, this is the day his house has been bombed. He's nearly been killed. And his message, we thank God. We thank God that after 70 years of Soviet communism, we are free to pray again.

[9:02] We have to pray in cellars, in the field of battle, defending the lives of those who are near and dear. Then a challenge to all of us. It's not only the perpetrators of evil who commit sin, but those who stand by, seeing and knowing, but do not condemn it or try to avert it.

We have a gospel of love. Whatever demonic forces unleashed against us, not only in this war, but anywhere in the world, we must still love. We must always love.

That's the message you get from the persecuted church all the time. A message of love. We leave Karabakh, a symbolic slide. People love using candles when they pray, and that's inside that wonderful church.

People praying, but for me, it's a symbolic picture. That little land, a place of such death and darkness, is now like a light, shining. We have a rehabilitation center we support there, bringing hope and healing far beyond that little land to darkness in the lands around it.

The seatbelts on, no jet lag, off to Burma. The Burmese government has allowed some reforms, but as we see on the televisions, still perpetrating human rights violations, military offensives against the Muslim Rohingya, the Karen, the Karenni, the predominantly Buddhist Shan, predominantly Christian Kachin.

[10:16] Here we are crossing illegally from Thailand into Burma, exhilarated by beauty, but a heavy heart. We know we're going into a land of darkness. When the Burmese army attacks, this is jungle terrain, everything just goes up in smoke.

But we meet miracles of grace in those circumstances. Look at this lovely lady. She's called Masu. Now, her village was attacked. Her home was burnt to smithereens.

Then Burmese soldiers ran through just shooting people. She was shot. She's quite badly wounded by the soldier who shot her. She's in someone else's home, recovering from her wounds, lost everything.

But look at her radiant smile. And when I asked her what she felt about the soldier who shot her, her words make me feel spiritually microscopic.

Masu, what do you feel about the soldier who shot you? I love him. It says in the Bible we should love our enemies. So, of course, I love him. He is my brother. Say that about the soldier who shoots you?

[11:18] It doesn't make me feel microscopic in my spiritual standards. In one of the refugee camps across the border where Karen people have had to flee, Pastor Simon, who's recently passed away, a Baptist pastor, he set up a Bible school.

Here they are worshipping on a Sunday morning in their traditional Karen dress, worshipping with such joy. But listen to this, his personal testimony. And as we read these words, wonderful words, remember that English is his sixth language, fifth language.

He'll speak Karen, he'll speak Burmese, he'll speak Thai, he'll speak an Indian dialect. Listen to his amazing use of English, fifth language, and his amazing faith.

They call us a displaced people. But thank God we're not misplaced. They say they see no hope for our future. But praise God, our future is as bright as the promises of God.

They say the life of our people is a misery. But praise God, our life is a mystery. For what they say is what they see, and what they see is temporal. But ours is the eternal.

[12:25] All because we put ourselves in the hands of the God we trust. Isn't that a wonderful living testimony? What a privilege to be alongside our brothers and sisters with such living faith.

But the people of Burma need your prayers. As we leave, it's a picture I took in that camp. It symbolizes they're still trapped, suffering horrendous persecution, but with amazing grace and dignity.

Seatbelts on, no jet lag off to Sudan. South Sudan suffered a war inflicted by the Islamist regime, the same ideology as al-Qaeda and ISIS. In Khartoum, from 1989 to 2005, a war in which two million perished, four million displaced, tens of thousands of women and children abducted into slavery.

I've written a book on slavery, modern-day slavery, and I'm so glad it was part of your theme this morning. And the first three chapters of that book are the real-life stories of people whom I've met today who suffered slavery in Sudan, in Burma, in northern Uganda.

But we were in those terrible, terrible killing fields during that war. Remember walking through the killing fields, the slaughtered cattle. I won't show you the human corpses.

[13:38] All the churches were destroyed, a little lad and all that remains of his church. Just look at this mum and her little one. And she, for me, epitomizes the price of faith paid by the persecuted church.

Her little one is dying, is dying of starvation. They've got no clothes, as you can see, but these are her words. You know, I could go to a government of Sudan, her clinic, for food, medicine, and clothes.

But Islamic aid is conditional. I know if I do, we'll have to convert to Islam in order to receive help. That we will never do. We were born Christians. We would rather die as Christians than convert to Islam.

A tough call for yourself. To sacrifice your child for your faith. I'm blessed with ten grandchildren. I can hardly imagine the anguish of making a choice between faith and my children's death. It's a choice they make. We've heard that many times, how much they need our prayers. This lovely little lady's lovely smile. Her hand.

[14:40] You recognize leprosy. I find it a great privilege to hold that lady's hand. And I happen to be a third order Franciscan, but I think these words of St. Francis speak to any and all of us as a challenge.

Pity weeps and turns away. We can all see the television or read the newspapers and say how terrible and maybe shed a tear and turn away. Compassion weeps and puts out a hand to help. What a privilege. It's what ARD of Canada is doing. It's what we try to do in heart. What a privilege. The talk I gave yesterday is the pain and the passion. The privilege of making a difference. Well, just to come back to South Sudan, that jihad war left South Sudan devastated and destitute. Civil wars created new tragedies, massive displacement.

But people have tremendous integrity, resilience, and faith. Archbishop Moses Deng, the Anglican bishop there, is our heart partner. He's an amazing guy. He saves lives with emergency food aid.

[15:38] He helps displaced people to become self-sufficient with tools and seeds. He's rebuilding schools for a lost generation who couldn't attend school in the previous war because of constant aerial bombardment.

But the challenges are legion. These are people who fled into his diocese. They have nothing. We had an urgent telephone call from him about a few months ago. A thousand people had fled into his cathedral compound from the Civil War.

They were dying of starvation. And it was a creed occur for help for food. In the midst of the humanitarian catastrophe, we were able to help a little bit with that food. The faith, the church grows.

He's recently confirmed over 3,000 Christians from three villages in his diocese. See, we could do with 3,000 confirmations in London, let alone 3,000 in remote area villages in South Sudan.

So the church is there. It's worshipping. And indeed, how the church grows under persecution. But the challenges go on. In Sudan, it's yelled north.

[16:42] Now the Republic of Sudan, wars, the tragedies of war continue, particularly in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. There's constant aerial bombardment by Khartoum of civilians in Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile.

Half a million displaced, hiding in caves and forests. Quarter million fled as refugees into South Sudan, already devastated. This is the market in Yabuz in Blue Nile, deliberately firebombed.

A girls' school deliberately attacked in the Nuba Mountains. Heartbreaking. They desperately want education. And earlier this year, we were back in the Nuba Mountains.

And I said to the commissioner there, we went in illegally. I spent half my time crossing borders illegally and completely shamelessly to be with the people who we need to be with. And we crossed over into the Nuba Mountains illegally.

And I said to the local commissioner, Commissioner, we need to see how your people are living. They've been driven from their villages by air bombardment. We're told they're hiding in caves of deadly snakes.

[17:42] I need to see that. Slightly regretted it. The next day, they took us by no vehicle to the bottom of a mountain. Then had to climb two and a half hours up the mountain, across the boulders in 100 degrees.

I mean, it's quite cool in Ottawa today compared with that, I can tell you. But when we got there, horrendous heartbreak land. People living in these slaves, caves, deadly snakes, cobras.

I met a girl who'd survived a cobra bite. Most don't. When the bombers come, they have to crash, crowd, crush into those caves. And here's a lady dying of malaria. There's no medical care up there.

It is genocide that is going on there in the Nuba Mountains. And kids' pictures speak much more eloquently than my words. The bomber flying over, dropping the bombs.

And the roar, fear, anguish that is going on in Sudan today. In the war previously, I used to travel many times with one of the Roman Catholic bishops, Bishop Macram Gazis.

[18:42] And I'll never forget his words one day when he was speaking to people in what they call their cathedral. It's a cathedral under a tamarind tree. All their buildings have been destroyed. They have a big tamarind tree, like a big weeping willow.

And inside there, they put logs. And there's the pews. That's their church. And he said, you know, what a privilege it is to be here with you, worshiping in your beautiful cathedral under the tamarind tree.

Then he went on, but do not think we will forget you. You will be remembered as those who are closest to God. Because every day you are obeying Christ's command to take up your cross and to follow him.

Then he finished with words that I can resonate with so clearly. He said, I came, I saw, I heard, I touched, and I am enriched. We always come back from visiting our persecuted brothers and sisters, receiving more than we can ever give.

Just enriched by their miracles of grace. We move forward quickly, just briefly, to Nigeria. Over recent decades, thousands of Christians have been killed in northern Nigeria.

[19:48] In the 12 northern states, which are Sharia states, where Christians have been systematically persecuted, hundreds of churches burnt, and since the rise of Boko Haram, many Muslims have also died.

The escalation of Boko Haram's brazenness has created a reign of terror and intimidation in northern Nigeria. The Bishop of Bouchy, in one of his Anglican churches, razed to the ground by Boko Haram.

Another church, there in Joss, in Plateau State, what the suicide bombers did was they would take their suicide car or their suicide motorbike, drive it into a church service like we are this morning when people are worshipping, detonated inside that church service.

So people who went to church in the morning, many never survived until the end of the service.

Others were devastatingly wounded. That was Boko Haram. But in the middle of the ruins, they will always worship God.

To God be the glory, even in the ruins. And one of the things that comes out so clearly is the message, the very stones cry out. I was in northern India, in Orissa, some years ago.

[20:59] We were the first organization to get to Orissa after Christians were attacked and killed there. And we were walking through yet another destroyed church. And I was walking over the crumbled bricks, the broken glass, the splintered glass, the burnt cross on the wall or crucifix, whatever kind of church it was.

And the phrase came to me, the very stones will cry out. Oh, no, Caroline Cox, another book's just been born. You've got to write that book. The very stones cry out.

I wasn't looking to write another book. But with my friend Ben Rogers, we wrote the book. And I'm happy to leave it with you for your church library. Because the message is a wonderful message. Yes, the churches are destroyed.

But the stones do cry out. But they cry out with worship. And under persecution, the church lives. As we've seen, the church grows. And the church loves.

So humbling. So inspirational. And one of our heroes in northern Nigeria, Archbishop Ben Kwashi, his lovely wife Gloria, they've suffered so much.

[22:05] Militants have tried to kill them many times. One terrible day, about four years ago, militants went to kill Archbishop Ben. He wasn't there. So they took his lovely wife Gloria, who's a great friend.

I won't go into details, but they did the most terrible things to her with broken glass and splintered wood. You can imagine what I'm talking about. They also trembled on her so ferociously that she was blinded.

Her sight's been restored since. But, of course, Archbishop Ben immediately went home. And the next day, I had an extraordinary email. It began with a traditional, if you like, resilient sense of African humor.

He said, I've now been home for 24 hours. I've had time to sit and think and pray. And I thanked God for what had happened.

Because I know that when, well, he said, when my mom, when I was a little boy, my mom used to pray so hard I'd be a Christian. And I know that when churches in Nigeria get into trouble, churches in the West pray for us.

[23:05] And it's good for churches in the West to have to pray. So maybe we should get into trouble more often. And then he turned serious. He said, I've just come from the hospital. My beloved Gloria was able to sit to receive Holy Communion.

We had a wonderful time of prayer and worship together. And we just praised God. We've been found worthy to suffer for his kingdom. And we pray that all of Gloria's pain, anguish, and humiliation would be used for his kingdom, his glory, and the strengthening of his church.

To praise God for that torture, that humiliation. And look at their radiant smiles. But he also gave us a challenge. He said, if we have a faith worth living for, it's a faith worth dying for.

Don't you, that's us, compromise the faith we are living and dying for? My friends, in many ways we are compromising that faith. A different story for another day.

But in Britain we've allowed Sharia law. Muslim women are suffering horrendously from gender discrimination in Sharia law and polygamy and domestic violence and so-called honor-based killings. We are compromising the faith they are living and dying for.

[24:12] And in another year he said to us, if you don't fight these battles now, your grandchildren are going to have to fight the battles you have not had the courage to fight. While we are trying to address those issues in Britain, we will pray for Canada.

But it is a message we must remember from our brothers and sisters. And our final destination, a very quick visit to Syria. At the privilege of visiting Syria in September last year, we went up to Aleppo.

Western Aleppo was still held in government hands. Eastern Aleppo was in the hands of ISIS. We were welcomed by the Armenian community who arranged an amazing welcome for us.

Very inclusive. They invited all the other Christian faith traditions and the Muslims, the Imams, the Mullahs, the Yazidis. And in the middle of this debris, in the middle of this destruction, they arranged an amazing opening banquet for us.

And we were 350 meters from the ISIS front line. The bombs were falling all the time. But they had a quintet playing music all through the banquet. Music plays while the bombs fall.

[25:16] That's the spirit of our persecuted brothers and sisters. But we also visited the town of Malulu. That was a Christian town taken by ISIS two or three years ago, occupied by ISIS, eventually regained by the Syrian army.

It's being restored. It's being restored. They rebuilt the Madonna, as you can see. But it was a place where ISIS carried out its horrific crimes. This is the doorway to a house. You see bullet holes on the doorway.

The family living in there had retreated into caves at the back of the house. But ISIS burst in. They found the family hiding in those caves. They dragged the family out. They took the three men in the

family and put them in a room in that very house where we were visiting.

And they said to these three men, one as young as 22, either you convert to Islam or we will kill you here and now. They refused to convert. They were slaughtered in the very room where I was standing two years later.

Our modern day martyrs. The desecration of the holy places. The meeting with the total community, our Muslim friends, Anglican visitors, Yazidis.

[26 : 25] And what was particularly special was a church service in the Armenian church the following morning. All the community came. The kids were singing so joyfully.

The bombs were falling nonstop. But the kids sang while the bombs fell. Some of those may well have subsequently been killed. But as I finish, the most amazing message we had after that service, a Chaldean Catholic priest came up.

And he referred to St. Thomas the Apostle. You remember doubting Thomas? He wasn't there when our Lord appeared to the other disciples. And Thomas refused to believe unless Jesus came to him.

And he could see Jesus and put his hands into Jesus' wounded hands and wounded side. And the Chaldean Catholic priest said this to us. He said, like St. Thomas, thank you for coming.

Like St. Thomas the Apostle who put his hand into Christ's wounded hands and wounded side. You came to put your hand into the wounds of our suffering. Now you have seen our pain.

[27 : 26] You can believe and tell our story. What a privilege to be alongside our brothers and sisters. We can't feel their suffering. It's beyond any order of magnitude that we will know in comfortable Christianity.

At least we can see their suffering. We can feel a little bit of what they're going through. And that wonderful image. You came to put your hands into the wounds of our suffering. What a privilege that is.

He gives us a challenge, of course. A huge challenge. How we respond. I say we need to celebrate the wonderful faith, the miracles of grace we encounter with a persecuted church.

But it is a challenge to us to be worthy of them. And our little organization, Heart, we're tiny. We have a little motto. Because sometimes when you look around the world, the issues are so vast, so legion, you can feel overwhelmed.

And maybe so overwhelmed you become almost paralytic. So maybe you don't know what to do, so you don't do anything. But our motto is, I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing.

[28 : 27] And if together we all do something, it's our idea of Canada, it's Heart, whether it's you wonderful people here in this congregation, we can have a little bit of the privilege of being alongside in spiritual love and in prayer with our brothers and sisters, suffering that persecution, making a little bit of a difference.

And I want to finish by reading three verses of a hymn. I won't sing it. I'm the world's worst singer. But for me, it summarizes so much of what I want to pray for when we do pray for the persecuted church.

And I will finish with this. Pray for the church, afflicted and oppressed, for all who suffer for the gospel's sake, that Christ may show us how to serve them best in that one kingdom Satan cannot shake, but how much more than us they have to give, who by their dying show us how to live. Pray for Christ's dissidents who daily wait as Jesus waited in the olive grove, the unjust trial, the predetermined fate, the world's contempt for reconciling love.

Shall all they won for us at such a cost be by our negligence or weakness lost? Remember Archbishop Ben's words, we have a faith worth living for, don't betray the faith we are living and dying for.

[29 : 48] And pray that if times of testing should lay bare what sort we are, who call ourselves his own, we may be counted worthy then to wear with quiet fortitude Christ's only crown, the crown that in his saints he wears again, the crown of thorns that signifies his reign.

Amen. Thank you.